

DISCUSSION

THE POSSIBILITY OF A UNIVERSAL NORMATIVE ETHIC /

JOHN COBB

IN THE July, 1953, issue of *Ethics* Asher Moore states and defends the thesis that a universal normative ethic is an impossibility because the concept itself involves a contradiction in terms.¹ The extreme difficulty and even the practical impossibility of the task have often been acknowledged, but the thesis of its a priori impossibility throws a different light upon the matter. If it is correct, this article should constitute a turning point in the history of ethical thought. This applies to religious thought as well as to secular thought, for Moore properly points out that the question is not one of a naturalistic ethic only but of absolutely any ethic whatsoever. Surely his argument, therefore, is deserving of the most critical analytical consideration.

Moore states that a universal normative principle is a contradiction in terms because it involves two mutually contradictory ideas. These are:

"I. The normative character of a normative principle is dependent on the facts of human psychology."²

"II. The normative character of a normative principle is independent of the facts of human psychology."³

If both these statements are accepted without qualification, then the effort to achieve such an ethic must unquestionably be abandoned.

In regard to the first of these statements there seems to be little possibility of dispute. Unless something is felt to be good or obligatory by someone or something (and the present interest is in people), whatever quality of goodness it may have in itself is necessarily irrelevant to an ethic which seeks norms for human conduct. But the truth of the second statement is not so manifest. It

rests first upon the assumption that to be normative in the sense required, a principle must be universally normative, and that this universality must be not only factual but also necessary. This in itself seems to Moore to render the search virtually useless, but he does not regard this as conclusive proof of absolute impossibility. The impossibility follows from his further analysis of what those philosophers who desire a normative principle really want. Such a philosophy seeks, he argues, "a moral principle which will not be based on any human motivation at all, but which will be normative over all human motivations. He wants a principle which will prescribe what sort of motivations men ought to have—a principle which would make it at least possible for us to say that even the deepest and strongest human motivations are evil and ought not to exist."⁴

If what is here described is acknowledged as at least very close to correct, the weakest point in Moore's argument remains that at which he translates these requirements into the flat assertion that a normative principle must be independent of the facts of human psychology and independent in a sense necessarily contradictory to the requirement of dependence on these facts. Perhaps a principle may be dependent in some sense and independent in some other sense and thereby satisfy the legitimate content of both demands.

Following, then, not Moore's final statements, but the arguments leading to them and supplementing and modifying slightly where this seems proper, the following analysis of what is legitimately involved in Moore's statement is proposed.

1. A normative principle must be felt to

be obligatory or to describe a course of action which is felt to be so.

2. It must be universally normative, and this universality must be not only factual but also necessary.

3. It cannot be dependent upon the general motivation, the liking, or the preference of the one obligated.

4. It must prescribe what sort of motivation men ought to have and may judge even the deepest and strongest human motivations to be evil.

Still other requirements or further applications of these requirements could be listed, but these appear to be exhaustive of the content which Moore actually gives to his statements. When a principle which satisfies all these requirements has been found, it will be time enough to ask whether in other ways as well it explicates the moral experience and may withstand further criticism.

Such a statement of what is required by no means renders the task an easy one. Indeed it does not show that the task is possible. But it does raise a serious question with regard to the claim that it is an *a priori* impossibility. If the reopening of this small loophole for a universal normative ethic is to be more than a quibble, the actual possibility of formulating a universal normative principle should be shown by illustration. The following analysis is directed toward that end.

The task is to seek principles related to human motivation in ways which are virtually universal. The qualification "virtually" is introduced for the obvious reason that an ethic need not be applicable to idiots or to infants in the same way that it applies to normal adults. The character of this relation must not be merely to describe universal drives for food, air, and sleep or universal appetites for sex and musical tones. It must be to describe that which is in fact universally felt to be obligatory, and this not in the sense of obedience being compelled but in the sense of obedience rightfully demanded. A demand is not a moral one apart from the possibility of its rejection.

The whole question is meaningless unless human freedom is real, that is, unless there are situations in which a plurality of genuine alternatives are faced. The first assumption which must underlie any approach to a normative ethic of any kind is that of human freedom. Furthermore, the task is clearly impossible if there is not a peculiar and distinct universal human feeling of moral obligation. This is the second assumption upon which the whole concept of normativeness must rest. This assumption need not include the idea that the feeling of being obligated has everywhere the same content or object. That question must not be answered prematurely. The habit of asserting a very definite universal object of the sense of duty has led this whole movement into disrepute and has caused some to deny that this particular quality of feeling exists at all or at least to ignore it for purposes of ethical study.⁵ Language bears witness to the presence of such a distinct quality of feeling just as clearly as psychology and anthropology indicate the diversity of objects and behavior patterns to which it may relate itself. Without further argument, these two assumptions are taken as presuppositions for all that follows.

With this understanding of the task and in full self-consciousness as to its presuppositions a constructive effort may be begun. If a universal normative ethic, either secular or religious, is to be established, at least one principle must be found which is universally felt as morally obligatory or which describes a type of behavior which is universally felt to be morally demanded. This principle must at the same time explicate the sense of the independence or objectivity of the obligation. Part, at least, of what is involved in these requirements was analyzed above. Since it is predetermined that the principle sought must be intimately related to human psychology, the search may properly begin with an analysis of that type of human situation which has given rise to the concern for a normative ethic. This is the situation in which a man freely chooses. When he confronts real alternatives and

pauses for a moment to decide which course to pursue, the questions of value, of the good, and of the moral imperative all arise. It is in the context of this situation, divorced from all specificity, that a universal normative principle may be sought. What does a man do in such a situation, and what role is played by his sense of duty?

The man who confronts this situation is a man of many complex, interrelated and yet mutually conflicting motives. Many of these motives are subconscious, but as such they constitute limitations on his freedom and so do not enter into this discussion. Compulsive behavior is not moral in itself, whether social or antisocial, and whether or not moral factors enter into its genesis. These complex motives are directed toward numerous objects, some immediately desired as sources of pleasure, others life-time goals, others intermediate between these. Every one of these objects is a value in the use of that term which is general today. The complex of these motives infallibly determines the choice which is actually made. Every choice is ultimately, even by definition, an expression of preference.

But one among the motivating forces in this choice is the feeling of moral obligation. In this paper the term value is applied to any object of any interest or desire, and the term morally good or right is applied to the object of what may be called either the feeling of moral obligation or the sense of duty.

Preference is influenced, but not determined, by the feeling of moral obligation. In so far as this feeling dominates, that which is felt as moral is preferred. But other interests, desires, and drives also enter into the total motivation which determines what is valued. The value of the consequences which would follow from obedience to the moral demand can be judged in terms of this total motivation.

The total motivation, the values which it recognizes, and the attempt to realize these values may be judged morally evil and felt to be sinful. But in many instances the recognition that the specifically moral feeling is attached to a course of action which issues

in negative value leads rather to its detachment from that type of behavior and its attachment to that which is the greater positive value. In other words, recognition of value reacts upon the content of the moral good and tends to destroy the distinctiveness of its contribution to the total motivation. When one realizes that the only reason for his feeling obligated to a particular course of action is unwise parental instruction or unfortunate social custom, the feeling of obligation will cease to attach strongly to this course of action. If he feels that greater values are to be achieved if he abandons his scruples, then he may even feel that he ought to cease to feel any obligation at all in that direction, and eventually he may cease to do so. The feeling of obligation may even be attached to a hitherto prohibited course of action.

The tendency for the moral good to be identified with the behavior which achieves the greatest value is in large part merely an increase in rationality and an overcoming of prejudice. If this tendency can be consummated in complete identification, that is, if in every case fuller understanding of the source of the attachment of the feeling of obligation to a course of action in tension with interest and desire may cause the weakening of that attachment, the existence of this particular quality of feeling does not point the way toward the discovery of a universal normative principle. If, however, there is some point at which the feeling of moral obligation necessarily and universally remains independent of the greatest value as determined by the other elements in motivation, then a principle can be formulated such as to point to that behavior which is inescapably felt to be morally right. The problem, therefore, is to examine human behavior and psychology to determine whether there is any ultimate and inescapable tension between moral obligation and general value.

That men always act in so far as they are free in the way they most profoundly want to act must be recognized. What they want may be self-abnegation just as well as it may

be self-indulgence. It is probably more often the social esteem and self-respect which follow from adherence to social mores than it is the physical pleasures of lust and gluttony. But whatever the action may be, in so far as it is a free action, it is in accordance with the deepest desires of the actor.

Whatever the ends implied in men's desires may be, choices, that is, free decisions, are certainly made with respect to alternative suggested means for attaining them. Such decisions are made in the light of the relation of the probable outcomes of the alternative modes of behavior to the ends then held in view. They are affected, therefore, by any added knowledge of the probable consequences of the alternatives under consideration. A very large number of choices are certainly of means to ends themselves not called into question. The key issue is whether all choices are of this nature or whether some are also made with respect to ends.

That there are situations in which a plurality of genuine alternatives are faced, and that there is a peculiar and distinct universal human feeling of moral obligation were stated above as the first and second presuppositions of this analysis. The third presupposition is that decisions can be made with respect to ends as well as to means. If this is not true, the question of the possibility of universal normative principles is not important; for if ends are not subject to choice, they cannot be viewed in ethical categories. If only means can be evaluated, skill and efficiency are the only criteria for judgment.

This third presupposition can be defended in terms of a consideration of the multiplicity of ethical patterns revealed by anthropology and of the effect upon the individual of a growing consciousness of this multiplicity. The fact that there appear to be few, if any, patterns of moral behavior universally recognized as good seems to indicate that societies are capable of developing conflicting ends for their members. The individual who becomes aware of this plurality of possible ends thereby gains freedom in his own choice of ends. Since conflicting ends

are commonly present in a single complex culture such as ours, experience within such a culture may serve to emancipate an individual from a given set of ends.

When an individual is torn between conflicting ends, how does he reach a decision? Once more his deepest wants are decisive. He contemplates the total consequences of following the ways of life between which he is torn and chooses that which most profoundly appeals to his desires and promises greatest satisfaction for his needs. New knowledge about these ways of life and their consequences, and about himself and his needs, will affect his decision.

But this still does not suggest the full complexity of the actual situation. In the process of acquiring new knowledge, whether it be mere knowledge of facts or whether it be more intimate acquaintance with persons and movements and ideas, the nature of a man's wants and needs and desires is itself changed. Furthermore, these too may come in conflict with one another, and consideration may be given to efforts to weaken one and strengthen another.

Where ends are definite and means are debated, there can be error, but no sin. In so far as a man is free, he will always choose the means which he thinks will most nearly attain the complex of his ends. He will employ not only his own knowledge but also the knowledge of others in whom he has confidence if the decision is an important one for him. If he is convinced in some way that a further understanding of the situation would lead him to make the choice in a particular way, even though he does not himself have this knowledge, he will act in accordance with it.

But where ends themselves are brought into question, a very different situation prevails. Here, also, it seems at first that choices of general ends will be made for the greatest satisfaction of the total motivation and that all available knowledge of whatever kind will be employed. But here there are limits, and these occur just where the knowledge or experience relevant to the determination of the end threatens to modify also the under-

lying desires and wants. At some point one may know that if he permitted himself to think more clearly on some subject, to become more intimately acquainted with some person, or to immerse himself more deeply in some situation, he would be led to desire that which he now abhors. This realization may lead him to avoid and to ignore this knowledge as far as he can. He may act in accordance only with that knowledge which does not threaten his basic motives, still recognizing that he is intentionally ignoring matters of relevance to his decision. He cannot in this situation escape the attachment of the feeling of moral obligatoriness to that action which would be in accordance with a wider acceptance of relevant facts.

The goal has been to find a principle for the morally right such that that which is judged right by it is necessarily felt to be obligatory. To arrive at such a criterion, the way in which choices actually are made has been described. The conclusion has been that where men are confronted by alternatives and, therefore, with the existential problem of the necessity of choosing, they make their choice in the light of all available relevant knowledge and experience. The only exception to this rule is that when one feels that such knowledge and experience threaten to change his basic motives, he may freely ignore or deny them. But it is claimed that even when he does so he cannot escape the recognition of the moral obligatoriness of that action which he would have followed had he not wilfully excluded data relevant to this choice.

In many circumstances, when tension is felt between the greatest value as determined by the complex of desires and interests and the morally right as that which is felt to be morally obligatory, an understanding of why the feeling of moral obligation acts as it does will weaken its distinctive contribution. But at least at one point, it is here asserted, this does not occur. At this point the tension between desire and obligation can be relieved only if desire is brought into harmony with obligation. This will fol-

low if the relevant facts are faced and the relevant experience acquired.

The definition of the morally right which emerges from this analysis is now inescapable. *In any situation that behavior is morally right to which full recognition of all available relevant knowledge and experience would lead the individual involved in that situation.* This is a definition of what is relatively right, that is, of what is right for any particular individual at a particular time and place. *That behavior would be ideally right which would follow from perfect knowledge.*

That which is morally right relative to a limited and fallible person may, of course, have unfortunate results. It may be judged evil in the light of its consequences. However, although it may be an objectively mistaken choice, it remains the morally right one. In the case of the ideally right, on the other hand, moral and objective judgments necessarily coincide.

It is not here held and probably cannot be maintained that the sense of guilt which follows when one wilfully refuses to consider relevant knowledge is necessarily conscious. Guilt, and all that is associated with it, is commonly repressed partially or totally. When the refusal to come to terms with truth or experience is itself caused by a feeling of obligation to a social or religious code, the likelihood of the refusal of consciousness to acknowledge guilt is increased. The presence of guilt feelings can be detected, therefore, only indirectly.

Racial segregation practices are an interesting case in point. When a person is thoroughly indoctrinated as to the propriety and even the moral obligatoriness of maintaining segregation, he feels guilty when he violates the social taboos. On the other hand, in maintaining them he does emotional injury to many with whom he is at least partially aware that he is capable of sympathetically identifying himself. To protect himself he refuses to allow himself to enter into that kind of relationship which can cause the sympathetic identification. Correspondingly, he adheres to certain ideals which, if applied to the case of interracial

relations, would condemn his actions as unjust. He therefore refuses to make this application. If the present analysis is correct, he cannot in either case escape the feeling of guilt, but because the guilt is incurred in the process of doing what is socially demanded and is also felt to be right, its presence is denied and repression ordinarily occurs. The presence of subconscious guilt feelings may be detected in religious and political customs, social practices, and personal morality.⁶

In the nature of the case there can be no proof of the inescapable universality of guilt when knowledge and experience are consciously rejected and avoided. The foregoing illustration is given only to indicate an important specific case and to prevent an oversimplified interpretation of what is intended. It cannot argue for the truth of the thesis. Rejection of this thesis must center around specific cases in which it might be claimed that guilt feelings are not aroused in this type of situation, and further defense must await such criticism.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the isolation of one type of circumstance in which the feeling of obligation is necessarily evoked does not preclude the possibility that there are others. To demonstrate the possibility of a universal normative ethic, indication of one such principle suffices. Whether or not there are others, and how many there may be, are proper questions for further study.

Finally, before claiming adequacy for this principle, careful consideration must be given to the question as to whether it satisfies the four criteria stated by Moore, in so far as they were acknowledged above to be justified.

1. If the foregoing analysis is correct, there can be no question but that the principle describes that course of action which must be felt to be obligatory.

2. The claim is also made that this is universally normative, and that this universality is not only factual but also necessary. If the analysis is correct, this principle is involved in the very structure of the situation

in which a creature with a capacity for feeling moral obligation (and apart from this it may be maintained that one is not properly human) makes a choice or a free decision.

3. It is further asserted that this principle is not dependent upon the general motivation of the one obligated. This also has been shown to be the case, for this requirement was one of the guiding principles of the search. Some point was sought at which the feeling of moral obligation inevitably pointed out a particular course of action regardless of the interests, preferences, or desires embodied in the general motivation.

4. It also follows that the principle prescribes what sort of motivation one *ought* to have. The motivation which directs one to act in opposition to what one inescapably feels to be morally right is judged evil and accompanied by guilt, and even the highest and best desires may be judged.

It may be objected that when Moore speaks of a normative principle as being "normative *over all* human motivation," he means that it must be normative over the sense of obligation itself. In what way can this also be true? It is clearly true in the sense that the feeling of obligation is usually attached to a particular course of action by virtue of social indoctrination, and that what is felt to be obligatory may, therefore, be judged wrong by the same feeling when greater knowledge has been attained. The observance of a primitive taboo which is felt to be obligatory by a savage may, when the savage has had wider experience and attained greater knowledge, be judged morally evil. He realizes at the later and more enlightened stage that his earlier feeling was itself wrong, although action in accordance with it was right relative to his earlier ignorance. He will realize further that the present knowledge by which he judges is still partial, and that further experience and information might bring a similar judgment upon his present feeling of obligation.

What is felt by anyone at any time to be right is so for him at that time, but may also be wrong as judged by the ideally right. Even when one is wholly obedient to the dic-

PB-07931-SB

5-49

C

337416

tates of his sense of moral obligation, he must recognize that he still falls short of what is ideally right by virtue of his ignorance. Guilt attaches only to the rejection by choice of that which is felt presently to be right. But ignorance is almost as likely to result in evil consequences as is sin. The ideally right is obligatory upon everyone even though it is never recognized, in the sense that it must be recognized as that which would be felt as obligatory if all the relevant information (none of which can be ignored without incurring guilt) were available.

The noblest and most virtuous man is judged both subjectively and objectively in two ways. First, because he is morally sensitive, he is aware that he is very likely to misread the direction in which the sense of obligation points or to allow his conduct to be subtly influenced by motives which, if brought clearly to light, his moral discrimination would condemn. The capacity for self-deception is probably infinite, not in the sense that a great measure of honesty cannot be attained or that the direction pointed by the sense of obligation is hopelessly unclear, but rather in the sense that subtler and apparently more virtuous distortions continue to remain possible. Rarely and per-

haps never, therefore, does the most virtuous man find it possible to say with assured finality that his action is wholly right, even in terms of the definition of the relative moral right.

But this is not the full extent to which the most virtuous man recognizes that even his sense of obligation itself is under judgment. For it is judged also in the light of the ideal standard which he must acknowledge formally without knowledge of its exact structure. The recognition of the discrepancy between what is presently morally right and what would be ideally right in any given situation does not lessen the imperativeness of the morally right, but should preclude dogmatism and hasty or unnecessary judgment of others.

This explains how in very important respects, although not in absolutely every respect, the determination of the morally right is independent even of the feeling as to what is morally right. It is here maintained that such independence can be required in no further sense.

CANDLER SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
EMORY UNIVERSITY

NOTES

1. Asher Moore, "A Categorical Imperative?" *Ethics*, LXIII (1953), 235-50.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 250.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 247.

5. Moritz Schlick, *Problems of Ethics*, trans. David Rynin (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1939). On pp. 9 and 10 Schlick states that the existence of a special moral sense is posited wholly hypothetically and in any case "fails to account for the variations in

moral judgment among men." In the present paper, no effort is made to employ the fact of the existence of a special "sense" to explain variations in the forms which it takes. Nevertheless, if there were no moral "sense" to begin with, that is, no particular or distinctive quality of feeling to which such words as moral sense refer, it is hard to see how they have come so widely into use and seem to be so readily understood.

6. Cf. Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1949), pp. 211 ff.